

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 10, 2022

Dear Governor DeSantis:

Floridians want to get back to life as normal. We want to keep kids in schools, businesses open, tourism thriving, and residents able to return to their daily lives. The new Omicron variant has taken Florida by storm, and we are concerned that state leadership has been minimal, inconsistent, and confusing. We are experiencing the worst surge of cases in the nearly two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, where cases in Florida have risen by 948% in recent weeks. Since the beginning of COVID in 2020, more than 4.6 million Floridians have been infected, and 62,628 have died. The 7-day moving average of new cases has increased every day for a month, and on Friday, Jan 7. Florida broke its single-day record with 76,887 new COVID cases. Florida's positivity rate has also ballooned to over 35% in several South Florida counties. Hospitals and schools are understaffed and overwhelmed.

With cases dramatically rising, and hospitalizations following suit, it appears there is no coordinated response or planning with federal and local officials from your Administration. To keep our communities safe and get as back to normal as possible, we have several requests that must be given your full attention:

First, we urge you to, once again, vocally encourage vaccines and boosters, and stop propagating vaccine and booster messages filled with doubt and indifference. Clinical data and real-world vaccine effectiveness studies show that COVID vaccines help protect against hospitalization, severe illness, and death, even against the new Omicron variant. In Florida, only about 63.8% of Floridians are fully vaccinated and only 33.2% have received booster shots. Further, 35% of Florida nursing home patients and 5% of staff in those facilities have received a booster shot as of Dec. 26. Unfortunately, while vaccine hesitancy remains rampant in Florida, in your first public appearance of 2022, you chose to minimize the value of vaccination. We know that booster shots help minimize the severity of Omicron-related illness and its potential lethality and that breakthrough cases are not an indication of vaccine ineffectiveness. Hospital data shows that more than a majority of hospitalizations are from unvaccinated individuals. Last summer, you even stated that, "If you look at the people that are being admitted to hospitals over 95 percent of them are either not fully vaccinated or not vaccinated at all. These vaccines are saving lives." Yet, recently, we have not heard you emphasize the effectiveness of these life-saving vaccines; rather, your Administration at times has cast doubt over vaccination.

Second, we encourage you to repeal your new testing guidance from January 6, 2022 and to leverage available federal assistance for COVID testing and outbreak response. Testing is

key to controlling outbreaks. It allows infected people to isolate themselves and inform other people that they were exposed to someone who tested positive. Armed with that, responsible people can opt to temporarily quarantine, limit interaction with others, or at minimum, seek screenings themselves. However, under the leadership of Florida Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo, the Florida Department of Health announced new guidance that aims to “reduce the use of low-value testing.” The new guidance states that “COVID testing is unlikely to have any clinical benefits” for asymptomatic individuals and does not prioritize testing children and young adults. This guidance ignores various realities. For instance, children and young adults regularly interact with more vulnerable senior populations within Florida’s more prolific multi-generational households.

Widespread testing is a valuable mitigation strategy that prevents community spread, especially when dealing with a more infectious and easily transmissible variant like Omicron. While there has been a nationwide strain on testing capacity, we encourage you to leverage all available federal resources to make testing more widely available. Reports indicate that Florida residents are waiting hours in sometimes miles-long lines to get tested; that local officials and leaders have asked your Administration for weeks for more tests and to open new testing sites to no avail; and that nearly 1 million tests in your possession went unused as this surge took hold in Florida in late December. Several resources are available to Florida at no cost, such as the CDC’s Increasing Community Access to Testing (ICATT), which can help states implement temporary surge testing sites to respond to demands for large volumes of testing. Our communications with CDC indicate that, to date, the CDC does not have a record of Florida requesting surge testing sites. We urge your Administration to work closely with local health departments to request immediate federal assistance to quell this growing testing vacuum.

Third, we urge you to reverse the four bills you signed last November that are keeping our local officials and private businesses from keeping their employees and patrons safe. These laws provide overbroad and harmful exceptions to vaccine policies, handcuff local officials from requiring vaccines for employees and students, and ban school mask and quarantine policies that protect students and teachers. These policies are not based in science and do not protect the health and safety of Floridians. Tallahassee should not tie the hands of local businesses, schools, and county and municipal governments from taking common-sense actions to protect people and local commerce. The highly transmissible Omicron variant has prompted widespread concern about transmission in schools, local businesses, and our communities. Further, they are handcuffing local businesses who need to make sensible safety decisions to keep their doors open and customers comfortable and safe. We urge you to reverse these laws and return control to the hands of local officials and business owners to make decisions that best protect their workers, patrons, and communities.

Ensuring these requests are swiftly met will save lives, provide relief to schools and hospitals, and more effectively protect our public health and economy. We are closing out the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and our fear is that your Administration is focused solely on appealing to a small minority who seek virtually no public health response, and that this motivation takes precedence over the health of Florida's people and economy. We stand ready to be of assistance to you.

Sincerely,



Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Member of Congress



Kathy Castor
Member of Congress



Ted Deutch
Member of Congress



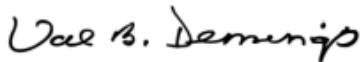
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